

# *Prospects on the Impact of Cool Japan in Southeast Asia*

## 東南アジアにおけるクールジャパンの 効果に関する展望

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### *Abstract:*

東南アジアにおける日本のポップカルチャー（日流）の広がりを吟味し、その社会的な効果が日本の国益にどの程度貢献し得るか推測するのがこの論考の目的である。今や日流は華流や韓流と共に東アジア全域で認知されるようになり、業界の追利意識を高揚させる起爆剤としてのみならず、行政側の期待をも仰ぎ、日本そのものを対外的にアピールする媒体として注目を浴びている。殊に近年、ASEAN 諸国と親交を深めようと試みる日本政府は、日流に「クールジャパン」という新たなキャッチフレーズを附し、日本発のポップ音楽やテレビドラマ、シネマ、あるいは漫画やアニメにソフトパワー効果を求めている。日流を通して日本そのもののネームヴァリューを高め、興業を活性化することで、これまで比較的手薄できたとされる東南アジア諸国の市場開拓に一役担おうとするこの動きにはしかし、コンテンツの充実化が求められる。日流は確かにその見栄えの良さや技巧性、あるいはファンタジーとしての面白さ故に「クール」たり得るが、その一方で日本の文化的な閉鎖性や日本国家が保持する歴史観の一面性を浮き彫りにしてきた点は、これまでも韓国と中華圏を含む東アジアの隣接地域とのやり取りの中で繰り返し指摘されてきており、東南アジア諸地域における日流の受容形態にも影を落としかねないと考えられる。問題化された事例の検討とインタビューデータの分析を通して、こうした点を出来る限り明らかにしてみたい。

*Keywords:* : J-wave, Cool Japan, Japan, ASEAN nations, soft power

キーワード：日流、クールジャパン、日本、ASEAN 諸国、ソフトパワー

## Prospects on the Impact of Cool Japan in Southeast Asia \*<sup>1</sup>

When a country's culture includes universal values and its policies promote values and interests that others share, it increases the probability of obtaining its desired outcomes because of the relationships of attraction and duty that it creates.

—Joseph Nye \*<sup>2</sup>

The entitlement of pop culture as a kind of “soft power” is perhaps due to the capacity of this peculiar genre of culture to allegorically influence public consciousness and potentially alter consumer lifestyles through fantastic means. Popular products can add new representational dimensions and corresponding meanings onto extant values through creative acts of their producers as well as imaginative labors of their consumers. For participants of pop culture, popular fantasies with which they are concerned can take their consciousness beyond the boundary of their ordinary life, refresh their senses, and provide ways to reinterpret their current state of being without the fear of losing their cultural grounds. This tendency for pop culture to operate as a breeding ground of stylistic change appears to demonstrate its special significance in parts of our globe in which open regionalism enhances multinational networks of producers and consumers.

With this perspective in mind, I will speculate the role played by Japanese pop culture in Southeast Asia at a time when Japanese government is trying to strengthen Japan's cultural ties with ASEAN nations. Rather than enforcing myself toward providing any conclusive statements about the definitive impact of the so-called “Cool Japan” on Southeast Asian societies, my aim in this preliminary investigation will be to reflect on some instances of popular cultural exchange alongside my ethnographic interviews with Asian university students, and predict on the basis of provided opinions the direction to which the current ASEAN-Japan co-engineering of soft powers may be taken. Since 2004, I had opportunities to conduct a series of sporadic surveys in Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, and speak to students from these countries as well as Myanmar, the Philippines and Vietnam, so I will selectively offer some additional insights on the basis of these surveys. I understand that the amount of interview data presented below is neither filling nor reassuring as a competent research paper, but I believe that it is sufficient as a pioneering survey.

The current exploration is motivated by the fact that the Japanese government is still at a stage of seeking how it can systematize its politico-economic foundation in Southeast Asia. My preceding surveys demonstrated that neither people from Japanese corporations nor Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs had any methodical perception of the actual conditions and deployments of Japanese trends in various Southeast Asian market conditions from which they could measure the possibilities and limitations of content marketing in what they now consider to be this prospective—thus important—region of the world. Researchers from Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) have been conducting a series of investigations on some Japanese trendy goods, which are so far the single most important documents on the marketability of Japanese trends in several ASEAN countries \*<sup>3</sup>. Relevant reports provide details in each national case in the face of competing influx of Chinese and Korean trends. Yet, these papers do not offer perspectives beyond bureaucratic speculations, which can strike at hearts and consciousnesses of Southeast Asian consumers. Neither do these pragmatic surveys provide cultural analyses that can highlight symbolic meanings and collective effects of Japanese pop culture to which those who wish to take

incentives in content marketing can and ought to attend. Needs to examine some known cases of crafted campaigns in the past and to cumulate the knowledge of haphazard osmosis that are traceable set the very stage for academics surveying the impact of J-wave abroad such as myself to be invited to a forum organized by the ASEAN-Japan governmental representatives in order to offer insights and discuss possible directions to which the new international venture can be taken.

### **Japan's Soft Power Diplomacy: Suggestions from Past Encounters**

Quarter of a century had passed since Asia attained its fame as a sizzling socioeconomic zone in the global flow. Asia's open regionalism, initiated by such intergovernmental organizations as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), drew vastly developing countries in this region closer to each other through increased trade, international communication, and population movement<sup>\*4</sup>. This created a cultural arena in which the identities and lifestyles of people living in Asia's industrial economies are contested through marketing and purchasing powers. In this context, the flow of Japanese pop culture into other Asian countries, known as "J-wave (日流)," together with the flow of Chinese pop culture or "C-wave (華流)" and a more recent "K-wave (韓流)" from Korea, stimulates symbolic competition among consumers who wish to construe and construct the urban lifestyle of Asia's emergent middle class<sup>\*5</sup>.

From the vantage point of the Japanese, a nation state that has long been demarcated by its distinct national identity in Asia, inclinations to open regionalism may challenge people to reflect on their national status in the face of speedy cultural liquidation. This marks a new phase in Japan's modernization, or what Koichi Iwabuchi calls a strategic, historically embedded project of reorienting national position within a familiar narrative of Asianism. Japanese interest in its cultural exportation is growing and this tends to be informed predominantly by a historically constituted nationalistic desire for "Asia." With such a premise, J-wave is designed to raise Japan's position in Asia and to reassert its cultural superiority over other Asian countries. Activated popular cultural flows are inducing Japan to encounter the achievement of capitalist modernity by several neighboring nations –modernity that encompasses familiar but different modes of cultural production and consumption (Iwabuchi 2002: 17,18). What outcomes can we expect from such a national posture as applied to the context of ASEAN-Japan cultural relations? In what follows, I will discuss two noteworthy cases in order to ultimately suggest the significance of attitudinal modification in soft power diplomacy.

### ***Ultraman Dispute***

The so-called "Ultraman dispute" is one such case that demonstrates what happens when the cultural hegemony of J-wave come face to face with a counter hegemonic challenge based in Southeast Asia. This event originated in 1974 when Japan's Tsuburaya Production Agency and Thailand's Chaiyo Productions coproduced an inventive movie called *The Six Ultra Brothers vs. the Army of Monsters*. The movie fostered the growing popularity of Japanese manga and anime in Thailand by adding a new locally grounded character called Hanuman to six known members of the Ultra Family. The movie portrayed a boy being slaughtered upon trying to prevent the robbery of a precious Buddha statue. The compassionate Ultra Mother revives this boy, and endows him with a power to transform into a super-monkish character with which Thai people are well acquainted: a *Deus ex machina* of Hindu origin that symbolizes strength and righteousness. After

achieving his revenge, Hanuman cooperates with Ultra brothers in their struggle against Gomora and its troop of evil monsters (figure 1).

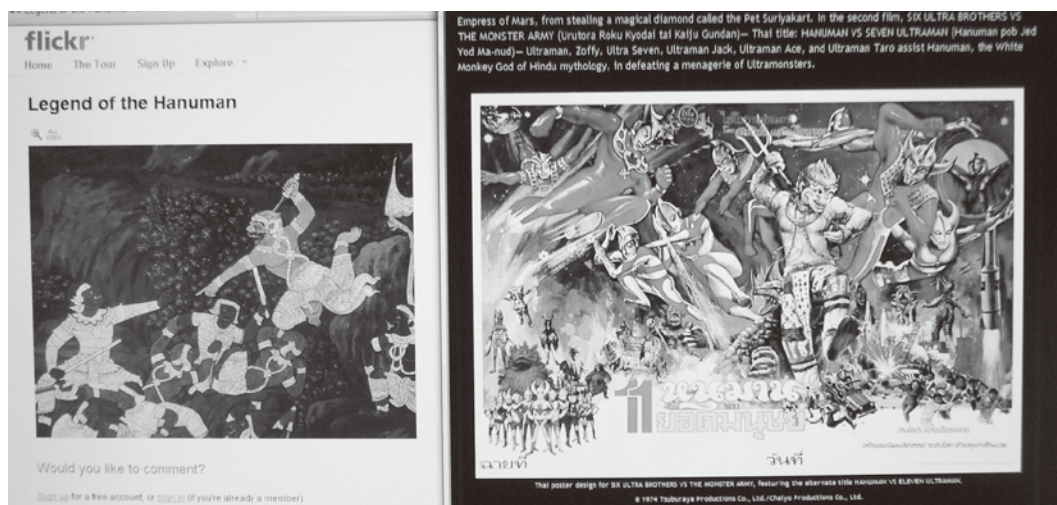


Figure 1.

A view of Hanuman and the army of monkeys fighting evil monsters (*flickr*)(left), and a Thai poster for *The Six Ultra Brothers vs. the Army of Monsters* (*SciFi Japan*, July 1, 2007) (right).

Released in Thailand in 1975, followed by Japan in 1979, this early joint venture was purportedly a contribution of Sompote Saengduenchai, a Tsuburaya novice from Thailand who founded Chaiyo Productions, Ltd. Although I have not been able to precisely quantify the extent to which *The Six Ultra Brothers vs. the Army of Monsters* became popular in Thailand, my interviews with eight Thai informants confirmed that the movie stamped a long term impact on public memory ever since its release three decades ago. One informant (24 year old male) indicated that mythologically uneducated youngsters in Thailand may grow up believing that Hanuman is an adopted member of the Ultra family rather than a Hindu deity that appears in an Indian epic called Ramayana as the leader of a monkey army who fought Ravana the super-demon. As a post-1975 generation, these informants became all the more familiar with Hanuman and the Ultra brothers through a series of advertising campaigns that was initiated by Chaiyo Productions— most notably through the remaking of *The Six Ultra Brothers vs. the Army of Monsters* in Thailand in 2001.

In spite of such an invaluable opportunity to set up an international symbol from which two Asian nations could co-benefit, Tsuburaya and Chaiyo Productions, starting from 1996, engaged in a prolonged legal battle over licensing rights of Ultraman series outside Japan. Somporte claimed that his long time collaboration with Tsuburaya Agency, and a contract he exchanged back in 1976 with the Agency's head of the time, Noboru Tsuburaya (died in 1995), entitled Chaiyo Productions to solely market six of the Ultraman series outside of Japanese territories in exchange for a monetary loan which saved Tsuburaya Production from bankruptcy. Somporte further demonstrated that Ultramen's facial features were designed after Thai Buddhist edifices which he introduced to Eiji Tsurubaya, the founder of Tsuburaya Productions. Tsuburaya Agency argued that

Somporde made up his stories, and that the contract was also fabricated. Sentences of different tones by Japanese and Thai courts appeared between 1997 and 2008, discouraging both agencies from merchandizing certain movies and related character goods within and outside of their countries.

Confused by this dispute, retailers from other countries who wished to market Ultraman series in their homelands could not determine which one of the two agencies to turn in order to obtain their marketing licenses \*<sup>6</sup>. The legal dispute also reminded Ultraman fans of hideous capitalist politics operating underneath the veil of popular fantasies as it made these fans to suffer from limited official access to their idols. In relevance to this problem, one Japanese informant of mine (23 year old male) pointed out that he heard about the legendary Hanuman as a part of the Ultraman series since childhood, but never had a chance to see its brave act. He felt sorry to realize as a grownup that the dispute has been preventing *The Six Ultra Brothers vs. the Army of Monsters* to be replayed in Japan ever since 1979. In his words, ugly money making politics can so often destroy chances to appreciate precious pop arts.

In my eyes, the Ultraman dispute aptly demonstrates how internationally damaging competitive corporate encounters (or struggles) over licensing rights can be. Should Tsuburaya and Chaiyo Agencies worked harder toward establishing an international network under some diplomatic supervision, they would have sustained an ultra-allegory that could not only fascinate audience cross-nationally but also bring together two spiritual sectors of Hinduism and Buddhism, and in so doing contribute to the growing need (?) for a new form of spiritual unity in Asia.

### *Oshin Syndrome*

Another example of J-wave that played an important allegorical role in Southeast Asia was a serialized morning drama called *Oshin*. Aired on Japan's national broadcasting<sup>7</sup> station NHK between April 1983 and March 1984 in the manner of 297 episodes (15 minutes per episode), *Oshin* attained one of the highest viewer ratings (52.6% on average) in the history of Japanese television broadcasting \*<sup>7</sup>. A biographic drama that was modeled after the mother of Kazuo Wada, the founder of Japan based multinational supermarket chain called Yaohan (established in 1930), the series traced an extraordinary life of a woman named Shin Tanokura during the three periods of Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa up to the early 1980s (figure 2).



Figure 2.

A snapshot of *Oshin* introduced in a Vietnamese fan's page (*Chào mừng bạn đến với Jai Entertainment*).



Born into a poor family, Shin, nicknamed Oshin, faced all sorts of hardships in her passage unto adulthood: undergoing low wage labors as a young girl in order to support her poor family; constant abuse by her employer; freezing in blizzards of snow while running away; being ill-accused of stealing money; being forced to take part in prostitution; going to Tokyo as a seasonal worker; suffering from unapproved marriage; residence and business being destroyed by the Great Earthquake of 1923; experiencing miscarriage due to harsh part-time workloads; struggling to survive the impoverished living conditions of the Second World War; and having have to deal with a series of family conflicts and business politics even after her postwar economic success. Yet, determined to fight against all odds, Oshin continuously looked to the bright side of her life (e.g., friendships with sympathetic coworkers, chasing her dream to be a hair stylist, hopes to rebuild life, and enjoying the ownership of small businesses). She patiently worked her way up towards personal achievement, and became a tough and experienced head of her own extended family as well as a large supermarket chain in the end.

With the cooperation of Japan Foundation, NHK International reproduced *Oshin* series for worldwide distribution in 1984, and the series were broadcasted in 59 countries as well as regions. Audience reactions were remarkable in Southeast Asian countries, and there are reports indicating phenomena such as the Indonesian broadcaster being flooded with protests from viewers because of the conflict between broadcasting timeframe and the time to prepare supper.<sup>\*8</sup> In Vietnam, the state and the media have been utilizing *Oshin* as a way of emphasizing the morality of market reforms ever since the series' broadcast in late 1990s. As Ashley Pettus (2000: 225) elaborated, popular television dramas such as *Oshin* expressed human virtues of feminine endurance, simplicity, and hard work, and these competing visions of femininity entered everyday talk about women's roles and reinforced the contradictory impulses of Vietnamese women to simultaneously pursue national tradition and personal aspirations. Thus, the term "Oshin (*ôsin*)" had become a euphemism for hardworking female domestic workers in Vietnam<sup>\*9</sup>.

As far as national abilities to attract the greatest number of people and establish preferences through intangible assets that are seen as having moral authority are concerned, *Oshin* stood in sharp contrast to *Ultraman*: i.e., the overseas distribution of *Oshin* was an act of goodwill rather than the pursuit of corporate profit. The allegory of Cool Japan in the case of *Oshin* catered to the era in which most Southeast Asian nations desired upward mobility in socioeconomy and worked hard towards the betterment of their gross national product<sup>\*10</sup>. Although there is no doubt about values such as perseverance, hard work, willingness to never give up hope in one's life, and/or the willpower to actualize one's dreams in life as projected in a drama such as *Oshin* continuing to speak to the hearts of policymakers who are trying to establish a "cool nation," one may very well be prepared to reformulate these allegorical contents in response to the ongoing transformation of public wellbeing and corresponding social consciousness over time.

My interviews with Vietnamese students (three female students and two male students in their early 20s) indicated that the image of Oshin is fading away in the minds of urban Vietnamese youngsters because these youngsters are becoming disinterested in images of the impoverished past as depicted in *Oshin* series, and because the influx of "cool styles" from China and Korea, let alone Hollywood, in addition to domestic capacities to design classy lifestyles in recent years, are casting doubts upon the governmental emphasis on outdated values. The "mood of our era" (so to speak) is definitely changing in Vietnam, and the state appears to be in a need for a new super-allegory if it wishes to maintain the morality of *Đổi Mới* market renovation.

## **Recipient Reflections on Cool Japan**

### ***Implications from Interviews***

Cases such as these inspired me to consider what course the cultural hegemony of Cool Japan may take in Southeast Asia, and to what accounts the initiators of soft power diplomacy ought to attend, in the light of some critical reflections on perspectives posed by J-wave recipients. Thus, I sought opinions from Japanese and Southeast Asian students from three universities in Tokyo who are in their early to mid 20 years of age. My informants from Southeast Asia lived in Japan long enough to offer their insights on empirical grounds, while Japanese students had experiences of staying in Southeast Asian countries which included Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand for three to four week period in order to learn language and culture. Both personal interviews and group discussions were incorporated in order to gather their reflections on the subject of the potentiality of J-wave in Southeast Asia. To avoid referential confusions, I will apply pseudonyms for these informants in my subsequent discussions.

As for the ideological implication of J-wave, all of my informants felt that J-wave could index Japan's national power in other Asian countries, just as C-wave or K-wave could easily signify an ever-mightier presence of Chinese or Korean national power throughout Asia today. Without inhibiting native culture and national knowledge, popular cultural flows from abroad can invoke personal impressions about the country in which they originated –however distorted these impressions may be. One Japanese informant Jun (male, 21 years old) elaborated on this point and stated that someone with no previous knowledge of, or interest in, another country can get a sense of the national potential of that country through the influx of products from, and subsequent media exposures of, that country. "The more overwhelming a wave of trends is in terms of both quantity and quality, the more convincing it is for us to believe that the country which disseminates such a wave must be amazing," he said.

My Japanese informants were all unconscious of how other Asian nationalities evaluated J-wave until they came face to face with this sort of evaluation. Saki (21 year old female) recalled feeling very strange when she visited Bangkok and reconfirmed how enthusiastically people celebrated J-wave in Thailand: she saw Japanese and pseudo-Japanese inscriptions on Thai products and realized that they were carelessly inscribed; she viewed countless TV commercials in which Japanese models appeared, but could not recognize any of them because they were all locally hired average Japanese; and she was occasionally approached by Thai youngsters who kept stressing how "cool and superb" J-waves were. Saki thought for the first time in her life that Japan and the Japanese could be so "economically powerful" abroad, and she wished she could use the opportunity to market herself if she could stay longer.

In Indonesia, where people have been receptive to Japanese influences since Sukarno, the nation's first president, practiced a clever trick of national subordination to the Japanese military during the Second World War, seven of my informants who stayed there agreed that J-wave was admired to be the emblem of "cool and high quality products." However, these informants found that linguistic incompatibility and current cultural distance between Indonesia and Japan prevented J-wave from attaining easy inroads to the Javanese market. Few exceptions to this were Japanese manga and anime, which managed to attract younger kids (figure 3). According to Kenji (22 year old male), people in Indonesia generally jumbled what they thought to be the splendid Japanese technology, which consisted of electronic, automobile, and sushi industries, with what they roughly heard but would not know much about until any of them are translated into Indonesian –be

it J-pop, J-drama, or J-fashion. Thus, with exceptions of Japanese manga and anime as well as outstanding drama such as *Oshin*, J-wave generally did not appear to have much place in Indonesian pop culture scene.

The situation was similar to that reported by my Japanese informants who stayed in Manila, Philippines –in terms of cultural distance and the way J-wave was locally treated. One of them, Mei (22 year old female), commented that J-wave was developing niche markets for small groups of Japan mania here and there, but nothing much more as far as she could tell. Denise (22 year old female) from Manila agreed to this and added that people in the Philippines had enough amusements of their own in everyday life so that there was not much need for a new wave of exotic stimuli. Besides, many people in the Philippines may not necessarily like the Japanese because of their continuing distrust in this nationality in terms of what they did during and about the Second World War, or in terms of more recent sex tours and corporate takeovers.



Figure 3.

Cover of a well read anime magazines among Indonesian youngsters called *Animonster*, which is subtitled “The best anime and manga magazine in Indonesia” (left), and part representing a Javanized manga strip (right).

Ramona (female, 22 years old) who also came from Manila made a similar remark, and stated:

Japanese policymakers and corporate agents should reflect on what Japan did to the rest of Asia politically, socially and culturally during the Second World War. They should be careful not to end up making a similar mistake in their efforts to disseminate Cool Japan by way of ending up doing the same thing in a style that simply appears new and different. They don’t need to tell us what to adore and buy when we don’t need so much of it.



Thus stated, Ramona warned Japanese trendsetters to be cautious not to abuse the soft power of J-wave and Cool Japan that it signifies in other parts of Asia.

Some of my Japanese informants also implied that Japanese people, as much as policymakers and corporate decision makers, ought to be more conscious of the ongoing international tension which tend to originate in Japan's imperialist rule and its ambiguous aftermath. Yet, these informants differed from my informants from Southeast Asia in the sense that they tended to differentiate the issue of Cool Japan from the colonial discourse of Asianism by stripping away political contents. Representing such a sentiment, Shun (male, 22 years old) emphasized how fortunate he felt to see the members of postwar generation in various parts of Asia coming together to share similar lifestyles without having have to inherit the kind of racial, ethnic, or national prejudices that their forefathers tended to hold against each other. He said:

It is not good to ignore history, I know, and to not think about what Japan did to other Asian countries in the past. Yet, historical procrastination is equally bad, I think. We [the youngsters of postwar Asia] did not commit those war crimes in the first place, nor do we ever want to!

Kenji (mentioned earlier) provided a similar opinion on this issue, and said that it is much worse to remain in a mode of historical conflict than to go on with the flow of Asia's open regionalism. As he continued:

We should be thinking about how people of different Asian nationalities can work together to create a better world, and I believe that popular cultural flows –J-wave, K-wave, or otherwise– can offer great contributions to develop the world of friendship where people of different racial, ethnic, national and historical backgrounds can come together to exchange lifestyles, share cool ideas, and enjoy fantasies!

When pushed to seek their future prospects on the positioning of Cool Japan in Southeast Asia, my Japanese informants all indicated that the status of Cool Japan in this particular region will depend on what specific messages J-wave will provoke in relevant destinations. These informants further wished that J-wave keep operating as an instrument of cross-cultural understanding in Southeast Asia through a series of cooperative efforts by Japanese and local governments as well as industries. They thought that the spread of J-wave in other Asian countries may indeed be the outcome of Japanese national and corporate powers to set up infrastructures for local distribution, and to distribute technologies of popular cultural production in the process, but more appealing to them was the idea that J-wave could cultivate common grounds of interest between Japanese and other nationalities in terms of “what's cool” today.

Upon further inquiring whether or not J-wave was becoming a common index for the people of Southeast Asia to identify their modernized positions vis-à-vis Japan and the Japanese, my informants generally implied that I was posing a misleading question by incorporating an excessively political tone. Yuki (female, 22 years old) indicated that such a view could be held by Japanese trendsetters and politically minded agents, but it did not reflect the general opinion of average Japanese consumers.

Thus, one may infer a gap in the perception of Cool Japan between the recipients of Southeast Asia and Japanese recipients: whereas the former subjects are sensitive about any political

implications that Cool Japan may connote, the latter subjects see the instrumentality of Cool Japan in developing a new way of life in Southeast Asia that can encourage regional coexistence, cooperation and communication between relevant nationalities.

### Lessons from China-Japan Cultural Relations

One day in March 2007, a Chinese Malaysian student named Mah-won (25 year old male), visited me in my office in order to address me toward a better realization of how rupturing the political induction of J-wave could be. This student introduced me to an article titled ‘Prime Minister Abe’s statement concerning comfort women influences Ziyi Zhang’, which appeared in the March 16, 2007 issue of Japan based online media source on Chinese news and entertainment called *Record China*. The article reported reactions of Chinese website viewers who, after having seen the image of their national pop star Ziyi Zhang (章子怡) in a seminude posture on a large billboard that was posted on the sidewall of Shibuya 109 Building in Tokyo (which is considered to be a Mecca for Japanese fashion) under the sponsorship of Kaoh (花王), bashed this internationally renowned female actress for having insulted her nation by becoming a “sexual slave of the Japanese.”

Kaoh, a large Japanese cosmetics corporation, developed a campaign project called “Asience” in order to “go beyond Japanese hair care market by introducing a new standard of beauty in Asia” and thereby expand its profit making territory outside of Japan (figure 4).<sup>\*11</sup> The company hired Zhang as its first image character in 2003, and posted the billboard in fall 2005 as a timely correspondence to Zhang’s international break through her appearance in *Memoirs of Geisha* (艺伎回忆录), a Hollywood film that was based on a bestselling novel by Arthur Golden. In this film, Zhang acted out the role of Sayuri, a deprived but gifted local Japanese girl who struggled to become a professional geisha and in the process attained the patronage of a rich entrepreneur—the role played by a well known Japanese actor Ken Watanabe.

In critiquing what Chinese viewers thought to be Zhang’s overshot appearance, the article also highlighted *Memoirs of Geisha* and indicated as the backdrop of this harsh critique a statement made by Japan’s former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe two weeks earlier, in which Abe denied any need for Japan to apologize for enforcing women from other parts of Asia, especially China and Korea, into the sexual servitude of the Japanese military force during the Second World War. Reacting to the U.S. Congressional resolution that called his cabinet to officially acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility for the wartime sexual enslavement, Abe stressed that there was no evidence to prove coercion. The article by *Record China* emphasized Chinese critique against Ziyi Zhang as a manifestation of greater public outcry that was directed against Japan’s neoconservative attitude toward an obvious war crime in Asia. Just as Abe reiterated his will to acknowledge the forced recruitment of sexual labor, or what Japan euphemistically referred to as “comfort women (従軍慰安婦),” by giving himself up to subsequent international pressures, Zhang’s appearance in Japanese pop media diminished after the event.

The intention of Mah-won in introducing me to such an article was to inform me that the people of Southeast Asia, especially those who are not willing to forget history, would be inclined to construe J-wave as a recurrent signifier of Japan’s ongoing colonialism. He said, “If Cool Japan will ever become so obviously political in its programming, Japan will have to deal with a similar uproar sooner or later against not so small portion of approximately 30 million overseas Chinese in

Southeast Asia!”

Over the last three decades of expansion in the Chinese market, Japanese trendsetters have been stamping undeniable footprints of J-wave on Chinese consumer culture: the adoration of a legendary Japanese pop idol Momoe Yamaguchi (山口百恵) since 1980s; influx of Japanese pop idols –most notably Noriko Sakai (酒井法子)– into the Chinese market in the early 1990s; the collaborative production of Chinese pop idols such as Shanghai Performance Doll (上海勁舞娃娃, debuted 1996) after Japan’s Tokyo Performance Doll (debuted 1990) and Osaka Performance Doll (debuted 1993) in the latter half of 1990s; Hello Kitty and Ultraman boom since the turn of the millennium; popular habitation of sushi eating, and accompanying debates on the “cultural propriety” of sushi; and a more recent fad of anime costume play in Asia’s urban centers such as Shanghai. Yet, Zhang’s case reminds us of how consumers in China (and other Asian countries for that matter) can politicize J-wave on arbitrary basis –regardless of the intention of Japanese and pro-Japanese trendsetters.

Given this kind of historical trajectory, we can see how Asian consumers can easily interrupt J-wave by setting conventional limits to the manner of intercultural collaboration and in particular what popular artists can or cannot do with Cool Japan. This Chinese case recalls reactions from critics to the phenomena of “Japan craze” or *he-ri-zheng* (哈日症) in Taiwan back in 1990s (figure 5). Drawing a parallel between Japan’s colonial aggression in the early modern era and present day influx of Japanese products into the Taiwanese market, critics including Jiaowen Qiu (邱瓊雯), Tianduo Li (李天鐸), and Jiaxin Xu (徐佳馨) professed that the spread of Cool Japan in Taiwan is a form of national invasion, and J-wave devotees or *he-ri-zu* (哈日族) are “cultural dupes” who ended up being absorbed by Japanese corporations (quoted in Ishii 2001).<sup>\* 12</sup>

Against such a perspective, Leo Ching argued that the discernable influence of Japanese products on Taiwanese culture stood in sharp contrast to Japan’s wartime imperialism. Neither inhibiting native language nor enforcing the destruction of native customs, inclinations toward Japanese popular culture was, for Ching, a matter of personal interest than political issue, and those who supported the discourse of Japanese domination tended to reduce the complexity of contemporary cultural flows into the simple framework of “good and evil.” Even if the significance of economic competition was to be taken for granted, it was not so clear as to what extent this was in fact a cultural domination (Ching 2001: 176-179). Nevertheless, Ching admitted



Figure 4.

Ziyi Zhang in a seminude posture from a billboard on the sidewall of Shibuya 109 Building in Tokyo (*Record China*, March 16, 2007).

that J-wave was exerting a discernable influence on Taiwanese culture (2001: 173).

In my own analysis of the spread of Japanese and Japanese style pop idols across Asia's new industrial economies (NIEs), I found that the worshippers of Cool Japan were capable of maintaining their political distance at the same time as engaging in their acts of J-wave adoration. The people of Asia's upward economies, especially students and young workers, accepted Cool Japan in so far as Cool Japan could disseminate the value of economic accomplishment and the imagery of urban lifestyle which they found striking and relevant to their own lives in transition (Aoyagi 2000: 310).



Figure 5.

An image of J-craze from an online homepage called *J-Craze Hospital* (哈日病院), which was composed by Heri Kyoko (哈日杏子), a famed cartoonist who purportedly aggravated the cult of Cool Japan in Taiwan ([www.nobitaworld.com/ashing/](http://www.nobitaworld.com/ashing/))(left); and the cover of a DVD jacket representing a Japanizing female idol group called Hey Girls (黒浜会美眉, active since 2005), which is the Taiwanese version of Japan's Morning Girls (モーニング娘, active since 1997)(right).

Thus, within the scope of these critical assessments of interview data and related materials, I found that our basic concern of whether or not Cool Japan perverts national culture elsewhere as argued by Iwabuchi is a matter of opinion, and that Asian countries are capable of maintaining their own identities and independent lines of social development regardless of the influx of J-wave into their living environment. I also reconfirmed that politically sensitive nationalities may set up a normative boundary of consumption, rejecting the overflow of certain external trend as they configure a conventional limit on the collective reception of foreign products. So, the remaining question is: what specific contents can Cool Japan offer in their Southeastern destinations in

subsequent years?!

### **Can Cawaii Diplomacy Win the Collective Heart of Southeast Asia?**

While the overseas popularity of J-wave as it is signified by the catchy idea of Cool Japan can cultivate common grounds for cultural exchange and understanding as Japanese and pro-Japanese trendsetters may wish to advocate with their national-qua-corporate interests in mind, a blind attempt to reassure the positive effect of Japan's soft power diplomacy on the way of life of other Asian nationalities is to neglect political messages that J-wave may disseminate with respect to the wider sociohistorical trajectory of national relations between Japan and Southeast Asia.

In questioning whether the world is becoming "Japanized" through J-wave, Iwabuchi contends that the tremendous diffusion of Japanese commodities articulates the universal appeal of Japanese cultural products and the disappearance of any perceptible "Japaneseness," which is subtly incorporated into the localization strategies of the media industries. Thus, the cultural influence of J-wave tends to be an "invisible colonization" (Iwabuchi 2002: 33). Iwabuchi uses the term "cultural odor" to emphasize the manner in which certain popular commodities come to represent cultural features of a country in which these commodities originate—in most cases stereotyped images or ideas of the country's national lifestyle—in the process of transnational consumption. He states that Japan's invisible colonization is reflected in the fact that J-wave is "odorless" in countries where the wave is distributed, implying that Japanese consumer goods in these countries lack any influential idea of Japan (2002: 27,28).

I find such an essentialist portrayal of J-wave as a form of cultural imperialism to be misleading (perhaps pro-imperialist itself!), and instead propose with respect to my findings that the cultural odor of J-wave is a matter of sensitivities and attitudes of those who make use of J-wave in and outside of Japan. There is no way of predetermining exactly how influential Cool Japan can be in Southeast Asia, although there are (and will be) sociocultural, politico-economic, and historical conditionings and identifications that lead people to frame J-wave into a form of cultural influence that resembles "Coca-Colonization" (Kuisel 1991), "Disneyization" (Bryman 2004), or "McDonaldization" (Ritzer 2008): influence that can softly "plasticate" (so to speak) native products and customs by the transformative power of Cool Japan. We will need to further investigate the cultural effect of J-wave in specific contexts of its use in order to identify the mindset of the users.

In discussing the potentiality of Japan's soft power, Joseph Nye contends that although scholars back in 1990s thought the close collaboration of government and industry in Japan would give it a lead in soft power in the information age, and Japan could manipulate perceptions worldwide instantaneously and destroy those that impede its economic prosperity as well as cultural acceptance, the nation's ability to mobilize resources for soft power is overshadowed by the weakness of political process, the need for further internationalization via socioeconomic deregulation, resistance to open regionalism as represented by immigration and cultural exchange, and language that is not widely spoken in the world. Above all, Nye contends that Japan's culture remains inward oriented, and its government's unwillingness to deal frankly with the history of the 1930s continues to limit its ability to transform those impressive resources that the nation owns into soft power in the sense of obtaining the policy outcomes it desires (Nye 2004:87, 88).

My current speculation on the aptitude of Cool Japan as a form of soft power supports these important indications that Nye makes by way of uncovering through ethnographic means how



Japanese people tend to remain generally indifferent about ways in which Cool Japan is received in other Asian countries and/or regions –albeit efforts made by the Japanese government to cultivate open regionalism through a series of campaigns in soft power diplomacy. Along with the ongoing national inclination towards unapologetic attitude as far as war crime is concerned, J-wave and its cool implications are likely to continually inspire non-Japanese Asians to surpass Japan by mastering its skills in soft power engineering without ever fully entrusting the Japanese.

Having said this, I wonder what culturally responsible programs Japan Foundation and its trio of campaign idols –alias “Cawaii Goodwill Diplomats (カワイイ親善大使)” (figure 6)– supply on behalf of the educational wellbeing of Southeast Asian citizens besides flooding their living quarters with the images of cute manga and anime characters, maid cafés, and extravagant but bubble-gummy ideas that these items signify: e.g., *moe* (萌え), *lolicon* (ロリコン), *cosplay* (コスプレ), *otaku* (オタク), and *fujoshi* (腐女子)? I am not sure how the political superimposition of childlike fashion, which aped the frilly style of Victorian Lolita and gradually evolved in Japan from the infantile, pink and gothic romanticism of the era of bubble economy (1980s) to a more kitsch, androgynous style that developed in the era of *yutori kyōiku* (ゆとり教育) or “free education” (since 1990s) that has been criticized for making Japanese youngsters “educationally deteriorated and self-centered,” onto the expressive behavior of youngsters in Southeast Asia contribute to their intellectual enrichment. \*<sup>13</sup>



Figure 6.

Cawaii Goodwill Diplomats in collaboration with Neko Jump at work in Thailand (*Yamaguchi.net*, March 31, 2009)(left), and Thailand’s cute idol duo Neko Jump (*Neko Jump Lady-Ready Blog*)(right).



Can those latest versions of Japanese style pop idols and idol groups with coy postures such as Neko Jump of Thailand meaningfully inspire young followers about various socioeconomic problems that beset local communities in our current global flow, or educate them about the significance of developing welfare programs that can be compared to those of North European

nations? Or, can they, at the least, teach those youngsters about the importance of Japan's Peace Constitution (the Article 9 no war clause [ 憲法 9 条 ])? Where would the pro-capitalist bureaucratic mission of soft power diplomacy that the "Japan-ASEAN, Inc." intends to push forth end up going –beyond a form of cultural intoxication which I would like to call "fancy infantilization"? Can Cawaii and other classy diplomatic strategies of Cool Japan truly contribute the establishment of peace and co-prosperity in Southeast Asia without marginalizing those who have trouble buying into the peace addicted phantom?

These are some of my points of inquiry that I wish to propose as a sign of closure: i.e., issues that I wish to further investigate in the subsequent course of regional sociohistory in which the use of smart power will, without doubt, become an ever mightier intellectual trend in the mainstream sector of our world.

## Endnotes

- \* 1 This paper is based on a presentation the author made at ASEAN-Japan Forum on Cultural Relations, which took place at Singapore's Orchard Hotel on July 24, 2009. The author would like to thank H.E. Makoto Yamanaka, the Japanese Ambassador to Singapore, Dr. Susumu Takonai of the Japanese Embassy of Singapore, Dir. K. Kesavapany of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (a division of the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and Ms. Moe Thuzar, the Lead Researcher of Socio-Cultural Affairs at ASEAN Studies Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, for their hospitalities and supports which enabled me to develop the blueprint of this paper.
- \* 2 Nye (2004: 11).
- \* 3 Examples of JETRO survey include the marketability of online gaming in Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia ([www.jetro.go.jp/industry/contents/reports/07000014](http://www.jetro.go.jp/industry/contents/reports/07000014)).
- \* 4 "Open regionalism" was a vision put forth by former Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama during APEC summit meeting in 1993. Murayama, alongside former U.S. President Bill Clinton's proposition to develop "Asia-Pacific Community," encouraged regional institution building that could avert sub-regional trade wars and protectionism.
- \* 5 These types of Asian trends are represented by the spread of pop songs (J-pop, C-pop, and K-pop), movies, melodramas aired on television, street fashions, and/or animations across other Asian countries.
- \* 6 For greater details of the *Ultraman* dispute, one may look into internet columns such as 'Ultraman in Dispute' by Bob Johnson in October 5, 2006 issue of *SciFi Japan* ([www.scifijapan.com/articles/2006/10/05/ultraman-in-dispute/](http://www.scifijapan.com/articles/2006/10/05/ultraman-in-dispute/)) and 'Legal Victories for Tsuburaya Productions' by Keith Aiken and Bob Johnson in July 1, 2007 issue of *SciFi Japan* ([www.scifijapan.com/articles/2007/07/01/legal-victories-for-tsuburaya-productions/](http://www.scifijapan.com/articles/2007/07/01/legal-victories-for-tsuburaya-productions/)).
- \* 7 Based on the data provided by *ONTV Japan* ([www.ontvjapan.com/article/01\\_00/family\\_oshin.php](http://www.ontvjapan.com/article/01_00/family_oshin.php)).
- \* 8 Referred to sources such as *The Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*, [www.imdb.com/title/tt0367380/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0367380/) and Pettus (2000: 225).
- \* 9 This passage is quoted in Thuan and Thomans (2004: 146).
- \* 10 This aspect of soft power is referred to Nye (2004:6).
- \* 11 For greater details, one may refer to *Asience* homepage (<http://www.kao.co.jp/asience/about/brand/index.html>).
- \* 12 For an earlier critique see also Chuang (1989).
- \* 13 For this passage on cutesy, I referred to Kinsella (1995: 220). As for the problem of educational deterioration, I referred to data provided by Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is summarized in the Japanese version of *Wikipedia* ([ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%AD%A6%E5%8A%9B%E4%BD%8E%E4%B8%8B#.E8.A9.A6.E9.A8.93.E3.83](http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%AD%A6%E5%8A%9B%E4%BD%8E%E4%B8%8B#.E8.A9.A6.E9.A8.93.E3.83)).

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